

Shattered: Tennessee Williams and His Glass Menagerie

Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams was arguably one of the greatest American playwrights to have ever had his work grace the stage. Born in 1911 in Mississippi to a hard-drinking “drummer” (traveling salesman) and a would-be Southern belle, Williams had a hard-scrabble life, moving from place to place and putting up with his father’s temper and his blatant distaste for what he perceived as his son’s weakness and effeminacy. Williams wrote tirelessly, coming up with several flops but also several plays which are now considered classics, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. Of these, *The Glass Menagerie* most resembles Williams’ own life. Although he was deeply influenced and inspired by other writers such as poet Hart Crane and the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, the dark sensibilities and the lonely characters of Williams’ plays are his own, taken from his own life experiences. He was a lonely man – a homosexual in a time when such things were frowned upon much more than they are now and he was addicted to amphetamines and barbiturates, as well as being a heavy drinker. He was a dark, brooding poet, as creative geniuses so often are.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams offers a rare glimpse into the lives of the members of a small, complex family. The Wingfield family is fraught with strife and confusion, as was Williams’ own family. The play is episodic rather than climactic in nature, taking place through a course of small events that are part of a larger theme. The exposition takes place at the very start of the play, as Tom explains that it is a memory play. Tom Wingfield, the narrator, says at the opening, “The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it.” The

characters' memories are the glue that holds the play together, along with the amazingly poetic dialogue. Williams' own memories are clearly visible in the play. The protagonist Tom Wingfield is a brooding dreamer, unsatisfied with what little his small boxed-in life has to offer. There is conflict between his inner desires and his reality. He wishes to be a published poet, but works at a shoe factory. There are obvious connections here to Williams himself and also a couple of nods to his father, who was in the shoe business and was frequently absent, while Mr. Wingfield was fully absent in *The Glass Menagerie*. His father was, says Tom, "in love with long distances." Tom's sister, Laura Wingfield, is eerily reminiscent of Williams' younger sister Rose and indeed allusions to Rose appear in most, if not all, of Williams' works after 1938. In real life, Rose was weak and disabled, diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young adult and institutionalized. Laura too is weak, disabled (though physically rather than mentally – her lame leg is an outward expression of Rose's inner condition). Laura relies heavily on her brother Tom for moral and emotional support, just as Rose relied on Williams throughout her life (and he continued to financially support the psychiatric institution where she was housed even after her death). Amanda Wingfield, mother to Tom and Laura, fancies herself still to be the Southern belle that she once was; she nags for Tom to use proper manners at the supper table; she talks endlessly and energetically about the many gentleman callers she had as a young woman.

It is precisely that – gentleman callers – which is at the center of the plot of *The Glass Menagerie*. Amanda wants Tom to bring home a gentleman to have dinner with them, for Laura's sake. Laura is not growing any younger, has few prospects, and has just abandoned typing classes at the secretarial school. Tom cares for none of it, and generally refuses to indulge his mother, escaping instead to the fire escape for a smoke, or to the movies for a show. However, he surprises his mother by doing as she bids and plans to bring home a gentleman caller for dinner. Laura is surprised to discover that the dinner guest, Jim, is a boy with whom she went to school, and they reminisce about old times. Things are going well – in spite of the electricity having been shut off, and in spite of Laura's nerves – until Jim reveals that he is actually engaged to be married. Laura's dreams are crushed in that instant, just as Jim, in a moment of clumsiness, breaks the horn off of a small unicorn in Laura's

glass collection – her “glass menagerie”. Here is the climax of the play, from which point everything falls downward like so many tumbling blocks.

In all, the Wingfields are neurotic and dysfunctional; it is a darkly poetic dysfunction, clouded with passive-aggressive behavior that is cut only by the knife-blade of sarcasm and subtle verbal jabs. This is Williams at his finest, with dialogue that is both beautiful and shadowed. It is here, in *The Glass Menagerie*, that we see the influence of Chekhov. The dialogue is simple but melodic, cunning at times. The plot is also fairly simple, and revolves around the daily mundane existence of the characters. As Chekhov is quoted as saying, “Any idiot can face a crisis – it is day to day living that wears you out.” There are no crises, per se, in Williams’ plays, but rather the trivialities of lives that are stalled, stuck, and frustrating. It is no wonder that his plays are timeless classics, for so much of the modern world can relate to feeling like a rat in a cage, running and dancing for the men in the white coats.

Aside from the brilliance of the dialogue and the subtleties of plot, Williams uses metaphors throughout the play. The use of light and darkness symbolizes the current state of their lives. The electricity gets shut off just after dinner, because Tom has failed to pay the bill, and one can sense the panic in Amanda and Laura as everything is engulfed in darkness. This is their greatest fear – being in darkness, which can be a metaphor for being alone. But Laura lights some candles, and all is well again by the golden glow of the flames. Even when Jim announces his engagement and Laura’s prized unicorn gets broken, the candles are there illuminating the fear, and Laura maintains her composure, even giving the broken unicorn to Jim as a souvenir. But after Tom leaves – and delivers his famous ending monologue – Laura blows out the candles. Not only to signify the end of the play, but to signify how dark things are and how lost she is without Tom.

There are other metaphors as well – the “magic” scarf and the glass menagerie itself, both things pointing out the illusory nature of the characters’ lives. Laura daily tends her glass menagerie, a collection of exquisite glass ornaments shaped like various animals. Just as she lovingly tends her glass collection, cleaning and polishing each piece, so she tends her own illusory world. Tom, too, is full of his own illusions. He even compares himself to the magician that he saw in a show, pulling a shimmering colored scarf from his pocket as if in

that one move he could wave a new life into being. “You wave it over a canary cage, and you get a bowl of goldfish; you wave it over a goldfish bowl and they fly away canaries!” Tom says of the magician’s scarf, which does indeed seem quite magical in that moment. The scarf represents the possibilities inherent in life, but also shows us that not everything is what it seems. All together, the Wingfields exist as their own tiny glass menagerie: a family of odd but beautiful creatures so unique and so fragile that it seems the slightest breeze will break them.

The Wingfield family as *the* glass menagerie can only continue to exist if their illusions are permitted to exist. The barely cohesive family unit, this carefully crafted, fragile family, will fall apart if any one of them steps out of the realm of illusion and into the real world. Tom is on the verge of breaking out of the illusion; he speaks often of wanting to get out, and compares his situation with that of the magician nailed into a coffin. The magician escapes without removing a single nail; Tom hopes to do the same, to escape without upsetting a single thing. He goes out frequently to the movies or to bars. It is perhaps only his emotional ties to Laura, and his mother’s guilt-trip, that keeps him at home. But the family’s illusions dissolve bit by bit throughout the play, beginning with Laura’s deception of her mother and continuing with Tom’s frequent outings and Amanda’s frequent outbursts. And indeed their world is shattered by a ruffling wind from the outside world; they invite an outsider into their little bubble of a comfort zone, and every illusion gets smashed to bits and the family is broken apart.

One cannot discuss Tennessee Williams without also having a generous discussion of Anton Chekhov. As previously mentioned, Williams was heavily influenced by the Russian master. In his personal letters and diaries, Williams has written, “Why can't I write like Chekhov?”, expressing his frustration and his lack of confidence in his own talents as a writer. There is a little-known play by Tennessee Williams which takes direct inspiration from Anton Chekhov and yet resounds with Williams’ personal lonely tones. Written in 1980, long after the highlights of his career, it is called *The Notebook of Trigorin*, and it is an interpretation – or a “free adaptation” -- of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. Begun as Tennessee Williams’ final and hopefully sweeping project, his *pièce de résistance*, it is a very loose

adaptation; it centers on Trigorin as the protagonist rather than as a secondary character and Williams – so haunted by his own sexuality – bravely shines a candle into the dark places by changing Trigorin's sexual orientation in his play. Williams struggled for decades with being a gay man, and had a few lengthy relationships that ended badly. It was his demon, and in *The Notebook of Trigorin*, he turned round and faced his demon. Unfortunately, the play did not meet with much success and it appears that few academics are willing to acknowledge it as anything of consequence.

Like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, Trigorin is a writer and a dreamer. The play, like so many of Chekhov's and Williams' works, revolves around the day-to-day lives and conversations of the characters, their struggles and their inadequacies. It is much the same with *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*; they have striking similarities. Both plays center on broken women and the loss of family estates. These broken-down Southern women appear frequently in Williams' plays – Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, among others. They are never able to move beyond the past to embrace a better life. Critics seem to agree that Williams "often depicts Southern society as characterized by an attitude of romantic melancholy or by a kind of aristocratic decay, very like the Russian milieu of his favorite author Chekhov" (1). Just as the characters in *The Seagull* sat about at their leisure, reading and writing and talking, or going for walks by the lake, so too the characters of Williams' plays seem to have no real direction in life, no driving force other than memory and regret and some vague hope for a better future, one which may or may not come. Williams' and Chekhov's plays alike are bleak, fearlessly so, and their characters are illuminated by the rawness that presents itself in their dialogue. "Go then! Go to the moon, you selfish dreamer!" Amanda Wingfield cries at Tom in the final act. And he goes. He slips out as quiet and dark as the night sky itself, with a suitcase, and perhaps a shoe-box full of poems scribbled on scraps of paper, newspaper margins, little square napkins from the bar. It's not to the moon he goes, but to strange cities and strange streets, where he walks at night, in a drizzling rain; and he never can escape his past, and he remains a lonely and broken man. Williams must have felt lonely and broken, for his characters are fleshed out by their flaws.

It is these flaws, psychological in nature, which most interest Williams. Like so much of the literature of his day, it reflected Freudian ideas; people still accepted as fact that homosexuality was caused by absent fathers and over-protective and seductive mothers (like Amanda). Whether Williams put these characteristics into his work because of his own sexuality, or whether he was simply reflecting the idiosyncrasies of his family, one cannot say. Whatever the reason, it can be assumed that Williams was influenced by Freud. Although he does not write of him, or mention his works, Freudian beliefs were abundant in the modern post-war, post-Depression era. Freud believed that humans acted out of dark and irrational impulses, and it is precisely that darkness and irrationality that Williams shows us in *The Glass Menagerie* as well as *The Notebook of Trigorin*.

The Glass Menagerie, written in the age of Modernism, nonetheless has postmodern qualities. Tennessee Williams was ahead of his time in this regard. The play is sometimes referred to as “proto-postmodern”, meaning that it straddles both eras of literature (2). Modernism had to do with becoming detached from social values, religion, and cultural norms, while Postmodernism valued a skeptical examination of all forms of art, religion, and society. The influence of both of these eras – part philosophical movement, part artistic explosion – is visible in *The Glass Menagerie*. Amanda clings to Romanticism and the strict social mores of that era, insisting on gentleman callers and a perfectly-kept home and regular gossip with the church ladies. Tom and Laura seek to go their own way, abandoning religion and society in favor of art. Tom has his poetry and his movies; Laura disappears into her Victrola music and her glass collection.

However, there is a touch of the Romantic in Williams’ plays, aside from the pointed absurdity of Amanda’s own melodrama. It is a different aspect of the Romantic Era, one inspired by Nietzsche. It can particularly be seen in the existential undertones of *The Glass Menagerie*. The Wingfields’ lives seem purposeless, as if they are running but going nowhere, much like the aforementioned rat in a cage. This is a quality inherent in Chekhov’s works as well, which may be why Williams made use of the shadows of existentialism, indebted as he was to Chekhov’s writings. The Wingfields are stuck as the world moves forward. Beginning with industrialization and the modernization and mechanization of means of production,

and followed by the horror of World War I, Modernism sprang from a desire to make things new; to take the past and rewrite it. Amanda is stuck in the Romantic era, and cannot keep up with Modernism. Tom and Laura are on the cusp of Modernism, trying to rise up from the mud of existentialism but put off by much of the Modern era. Laura rejects typing classes; Tom rejects both the shoe factory and the idea of a career in radio. While the fates of Amanda and Laura are unknown, it is made clear that Tom cannot forget his past, and has failed at rewriting it, for he never stops thinking of Laura and of his guilt at leaving. Tom and Laura are old souls, and one gets the impression that this world is too much for them to bear.

The world was, indeed, too much for Williams himself to bear. In spite of his acclaim, he remained a drug-addled, heavy-hearted man and died of a suspected overdose in 1983. His name and his work live on, however, in theatres and classrooms around the world.

Works Cited

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